OPINION

BY FAHD HUMAYUN

Challenging times

LOOKING back at 2025, several regional inflection points stand out: Pakistan's four-day confrontation with India, the conflict between Israel and Iran less than a month later, followed by Pakistan's subsequent cross-border strikes targeting terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan. Yet the coda to these episodes — India's insistence that the conflict with Pakistan is merely paused rather than resolved, fresh American threats against the Iranian regime, and unabated terrorism within Pakistan — suggests that whatever semblance of regional stability currently exists is provisional at best.

First, take India, whose regional clout has taken several hits. Chafed by US claims of a decisive American intervention in the conflict with Pakistan, shaken by the loss of military hardware, and facing worsening relationships with its smaller neighbours, the BJP finds itself, perhaps for the first time, on the regional back foot. The reflexive temptation will be to look for external wins that can offset domestic perceptions of weakness abroad, and it would certainly help if those new wins could simultaneously amend the international narrative around how the four-day May crisis played out, or at the very least, make the existing narrative slightly less equivocal.

Second, the threshold for crisis initiation between India and Pakistan is now low and dangerously arbitrary. It is clear now that the Indian establishment may choose to invoke even the slightest unrest in India-held Kashmir as a justification to resume hostilities with Pakistan.

This is problematic given that recent reporting from India itself acknowledges that anti-India discontent is spreading in IHK, while the central government's intelligence failures around Pahalgam point to clear limits on its capacity to pre-empt indigenous trigger events that could easily cascade. (It also doesn't help that India's leaders continue to pretend that the choice to attack a neighbour and test its red lines in a nuclear-armed neighbourhood was some sort of tactical or strategic master stroke).

Next, consider Pakistan's western front. Following US strikes against Venezuela, there is a real possibility that the Trump administration may seek to double down on efforts to pursue regime change in Iran. Any direct conflict with Tehran will put Pakistan in a difficult position, especially if it is asked to either support Washington even indirectly in unseating the regime in Tehran, or to endorse any other regional actions by the US in contravention of international law.

These risks warrant careful consideration of the measures that Pakistan can take to maximise its own safety and not find itself in a security predicament on either its western or eastern fronts in the coming months. With India, it is, of course, imperative that the absence of meaningful crisis-management mechanisms be addressed. Outside players could potentially play a role in encouraging New Delhi to re-institutionalise at least some channels of bilateral communication that can be pre-delegated and operationalised in the event of a crisis trigger.

In the medium term, strengthening deterrence in South Asia will also require clearly communicating to not just India but also to Afghanistan the costs of continued warfare through groups such as the TTP and BLA. That message could be reinforced by partners in the Gulf and the US in the case of India, and by China in the case of Afghanistan, especially as the economic and strategic significance of Balochistan increases for global players. Indeed, if Pakistan can frame proxy activity as a threat to regional commerce and returns on investment, rather than simply bilateral grievances, it might be able to raise the reputational costs for India as well as the Taliban regime in Kabul should such activity persist.

> The risks warrant careful steps to maximise safety.

Finally, on Iran, the Pakistan army chief's newly acquired currency with the Trump administration might be a useful commodity to leverage, if only to underscore to Washington the risks of intervention in an already fragile neighbourhood. While it is clear by now that the Trump administration will ultimately act as it sees fit, the role of regional allies and partners may still carry weight should the US contemplate a wider conflict.

To that end, clearly laying out potential spillover effects, including in Balochistan where the US has a growing interest, could be an element that ultimately informs the administration's calculus. ■

The writer is an assistant professor of political science at Tufts University.

BY MAHIR ALI

Wild, wild west

IT seemed almost miraculous when the east coast of the US transitioned into 2026 on a pleasant note, occasioned by the inspiring inauguration of New York City's young mayor. Any joy was short-lived. A couple of days later, Zohran Mamdani felt obliged to inform the president of his discomfiture over the display of predatory imperialism in Caracas last Saturday. Less clear-headed Democrats have also expressed their alarm at the abduction of a sitting head of state in a military raid, and the concomitant violation of both the US Constitution and the UN Charter.

Donald Trump's excitement over last Saturday's successful bout of thuggery has spurred wild threats against Colombia, Mexico and Iran, not to mention Greenland. President Nicol s Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, were meanwhile arraigned in a federal court in Manhattan.

US attorney general Pam Bondi announced on X that Maduro "has been charged with Narco-Terrorism Conspiracy, Cocaine Importation Conspiracy, and Conspiracy to Possess Machineguns and Destructive Devices against the United States". Putting aside her illiteracy, she might have noticed how her boss has stepped back from the absurd "narco-terrorism" allegation — which has been deployed to justify, without evidence, the extra-judicial execution of over 100 people in small boats off the coasts of Venezuela and Colombia — and is now focusing mainly on an oil grab.

Trump has claimed that Venezuela stole "our" oil, and that his mission is to win it back. His oft-expressed greed for all manner of resources is taken for granted, but questions have been raised about the decade or longer it might take for US firms to resume their theft of Venezuelan oil at a lucrative scale. Venezuela's oil industry was nationalised 50 years ago; Hugo Ch vez merely sought to close the loopholes in 2007. His aim, at least partially successful, was not only to redistribute oil wealth for the national good, but to offer it at discounted rates to Caribbean neighbours — not least Cuba.

Fidel Castro looked upon Ch vez as an heir — regionally and on the global stage. It wasn't just in return for cheaper fuel but out of a moral obligation that Cuba helped Venezuela to impressively raise its levels of healthcare and education — not coincidentally, these are precisely the spheres in which some of the current US administration's worst domestic instincts are deployed. Ch vez survived a US-backed attempt by the economic elites to replace him, but the socialistic basis of *chavismo* began to wither away not long after his death in 2013.

Maduro was the designated successor, but it was a poor choice: he evidently lacked the capability to carry on his predecessor's mission. Between 2012 and 2024, Venezuela's GDP dwindled from over $372 billion to less than $120bn. Millions made their way out of the country, mostly into Colombia and Brazil. Repression grew, directed more against the dispossessed than the exploiting class. US-led sanctions and attempts at regime change played a part in the downward spiral, but the Maduro administration has much to answer for, including last year's apparently stolen presidential election. But it should be answerable to the Venezuelan people. The US should mind its own business, as proposed by the America First doctrine, detestable as it may be in other ways.

To the consternation of some US allies, notably in Europe, the abduction of the Maduro couple has not been followed by the installation of their conservative adversaries as the new rulers, notwithstanding Mar a Corina Machado's full-throated backing for an invasion and her kowtowing to Trump after winning the Nobel Peace Prize, a patently stupid gesture for which the Norwegian committee ought to be deeply ashamed.

> Can any power now kidnap a head of state?

But then, it's obvious that the Trump regime cares little for democracy, whether at home or abroad. For the moment it has picked Maduro's vice-president, Delcy Rodr guez, as its preferred conduit for meeting Washington's needs. Her defiant public statements might be sharply at variance with what she says to Marco Rubio, the abhorrent ideologue who has long sought to abolish all left-leaning tendencies in the region, beginning with Cuba. His conduit is his boss.

What's hugely appalling, but not particularly surprising, is the refusal on the part of most European nations to challenge their American ally's barefaced banditry. Barring a clutch of justifiably concerned Latin American nations, much of the Global South seems equally reluctant to question the would-be global hegemon's return to naked imperialism. China and Russia have expressed their consternation, but what will they do as "anarchy is loosed upon the world", as W.B. Yeats put it? What comes next will depend on the whim of a demented emperor, but the rest of the world will at best merely grumble and watch from the sidelines. ■

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FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1976 | Fifty years ago

Coal reserves

KARACHI: A total reserve of 240 million tons of coal has been proved in Lakhra mine in Sind by the Pakistan Mineral Development Corporation, informed sources told [news agencies] here yesterday [Jan 6]. The sources said that it was the largest deposits of coal so far proved in one place in the country. The P.M.D.C. has also started work on a new coal field discovered in Pir Jahani in the salt range of Mianwali District in the Punjab. Deposit of 53 million tons of coal has been estimated in this coal field. … Meanwhile, the P.M.D.C. has submitted a scheme to the Government and with its implementation, the production of coal in the country would be about seven lakh tons annually. The present annual production of coal is 3.5 lakh tons. — News agencies

[Meanwhile, as reported by news agencies in Beirut,] The situation in Beirut was again termed "dangerous" today [Jan 6]... . The reasons for this were seen by observers here in the continuing Falangist blockade of the refugee camp of Tel Zaatar … in a new wave of hostage taking and … fight at the "traditionally hot points".

1951 | Seventy-five years ago

Liaquat off to London

KARACHI: Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan left for London at 00.25 hours today [Jan 7] by KLM plane to "discuss the Kashmir question with the Commonwealth Prime Ministers" … . The Prime Minister announced his decision … yesterday after a two-and-a-quarter-hour conference with those members of his Cabinet present in Karachi, following over-the-trunk consultations on Friday [Jan 5] night with those Ministers who are out of station.

The Prime Minister, in a statement … before his departure, said: "I have now received intimation from the Commonwealth Prime Ministers assembled in London that they are willing to take part in a joint discussion on Kashmir. I have accordingly decided to leave for London tonight to attend the Conference."

Saying that he was "fully conscious that the patience of the people of Pakistan and Kashmir has been sorely tried by the intolerable delay in the holding of a free and impartial plebiscite in Kashmir", Mr Liaquat Ali Khan declared: "I can only say that I am determined to make every endeavour to secure a just and peaceful settlement in accordance with the will of the people of Kashmir." He added: "If the effort … proves successful, the Commonwealth will have rendered a signal service to world peace."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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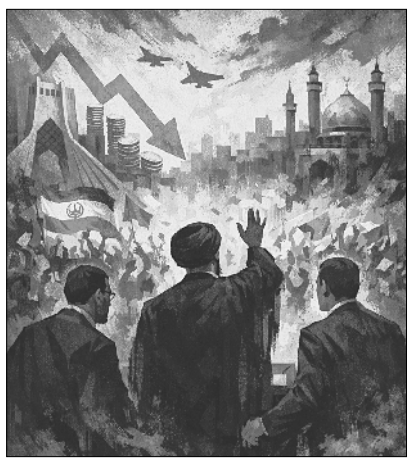

Unrest in Iran has harsh undertones

THIS is with reference to the report 'Israeli PM provokes Tehran again as protests enter second week' (Jan 5). The growing unrest in Iran marks a critical and alarmingly volatile phase that the international community cannot afford to ignore. Protests that began last month among traders in Tehran's Grand Bazaar have rapidly escalated into a nationwide movement involving students, truckers and bus drivers.

These demonstrations are the most significant since the 2022 uprising, and are driven by an extreme economic crisis that has seen the Iranian currency fall to an all-time low, with food inflation soaring above 70 per cent. The situation is further compounded by chronic shortages of water and energy, pushing ordinary citizens to take to the streets.

The regime's response has been characteristically fractured between conciliatory signals and brutal repression. While President Masoud Pezeshkian has offered dialogue to discuss "legitimate demands", the real power remains with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whose security apparatus has already returned to a policy of arrests, secret executions and live fire.

The appointment of hardliners to key positions within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) underscores a defiant resolve to maintain the clerical order through force.

Furthermore, the external landscape is increasingly dangerous. The snapback of sanctions in August and military strikes on nuclear facilities in June last year have not quelled the regime's nuclear or missile ambitions; instead, they have made Tehran more determined to protect its ballistic missile deterrence. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu is currently seeking the support from the United States for a fresh offensive against these capabilities, a move that risks inflaming a regional war rather than providing long-term stability.

For true stability and peace, the Iranian government must realise that militaristic solutions and maximum pressure have always failed to silence a population that has lost faith in its currency and leadership. The legitimate aspirations of the people of Iran that are related to economic dignity and human rights must be respected.

Muhammad Faizan Ali
Karachi

Merit in appointments

EDUCATIONAL institutions stand upon two pillars; merit and integrity. When either is weakened, the entire structure of learning begins to lose strength. In Pakistan's system of Divisional Public Schools and Colleges, governed by boards of governors (BoGs) under the chairmanship of commissioners, the promise of merit-based appointments has long been held as a principle of excellence. Yet, recent trends suggest a quiet drift away from transparency — a silence that deserves attention.

Across several divisions, appointments to senior posts have reportedly been made without public display of merit lists, declared criteria or open notification of results. While administrative discretion is important, secrecy in such processes undermines the very merit that these institutions claim to uphold.

Transparency does not weaken authority; it strengthens legitimacy. Article 19-A of the Constitution grants every citizen the right to access information regarding public decisions. The Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act, 2013, was enacted precisely to prevent the veil of confidentiality from covering public acts.

When institutions funded, supervised or regulated by public officials make decisions without disclosure, they risk losing public confidence, and, more dangerously, discourage honest educators who still believe in fairness. Restoring trust requires that every BoG selection process be made visible, accountable and auditable.

Prof Jam Mukhtar Hussain
Multan

Human dignity

THE utter failure of the system to protect and serve its citizens has never been more evident than in Shahdadkot where the body of a missing man was recently found, but was left lying in a garbage dump for days. The most brutal part of the tragic incident was that no official authority took the responsibility of ensuring a proper burial.

That the deceased had been missing for the preceding six months was itself an act of apathy on the part of all the relevant authorities. His body was found outside the rice mill where the man used to work to earn two square meals every day. While circumstances in which he died have become a mystery for the locals, the sad incident has raised serious questions about negligence, human dignity and the state of local governance.

Such inhumane treatment of a deceased citizen is unacceptable in any civilised society. The government, human rights bodies, and relevant law-enforcement agencies must take immediate and serious notice of this incident.

A transparent investigation into the death of the poor man and indifference of the government officials is essential to determine the cause of death, and to ensure that such incidents are never repeated.

Protecting human dignity, both in life and death, should be the foremost duty of any administration. It seems it is too much to ask from a society which gives priority and respect only to those who wield power.

Siraj Ahmed Khatian
Shahdadkot

Visa abuse

A DAMAGING *Financial Times* report on the surge in asylum claims by Pakistani students in the United Kingdom recently noted how several British universities have suspended admissions of students from Pakistan. This should be treated as a national wake-up call. Such coverage in a newspaper of global prominence harms Pakistan's reputation, reinforcing claims that our nationals lack skills, and are likely to abuse immigration systems.

We can acknowledge that responsibility does not lie with Pakistan alone. The higher education segment in the UK has its own issues, struggling to overcome financial pressures for at least a decade. Many institutions have adopted extractive recruitment practices, outsourcing admissions to loosely regulated agents.

Universities that have long depended on fee collections from international students do not want the practice to come to an end.

Having said that, there have been serious failures in the Pakistani system that demand immediate reforms in many sectors. Reports of students arriving with spurious English qualifications or generally inadequate language proficiency point to organised fraud that has ostensibly benefited all accreditation services and education agents.

More troubling still is what ultimately drives this behaviour. For many young people, especially those from outside the major cities and from less urbanised regions, the crisis-prone economy offers few incentives for stable employment and social mobility. Overseas education is perceived unfortunately not as an opportunity to hone academic skills, but as one of the few viable escape routes.

Students and families are thus willing to acquire crippling debt to exit a system that appears stacked against them. Many of these students do not complete their degrees, and work illegally in the UK's gig economy.

This is not merely a UK immigration issue; it is a governance failure in Pakistan. The relevant stakeholders should work together to regulate overseas education agents, verify student preparedness, and ensure that public and private institutions are not producing credentials that lack global credibility. If this problem is left unaddressed, it is not only the diaspora that will bear deep consequences. Pakistan risks losing not only access to key education markets, but also the trust that sustains international mobility and cooperation.

Dr Juvaria Jafri
Cambridge, UK

Funeral feasts

IT is a pity that even funerals have become publicity events, with the rot visible across social ranks in the country. We notice women and men spending as much time getting dressed for a funeral as they do for a wedding. The death of one friend routinely becomes a social reunion for the other friends who are seen laughing and cracking jokes. At a recent funeral, I saw two people taking selfies beside the grave without feeling odd at all.

While family members of the deceased are recovering from the loss, they still have to ensure that the guests have a good feast. From priority seats to hot food and tea, there can be no compromise on the protocol for the visitors. At the risk of sounding overboard, I have seen people at funerals asking for a cold-drink of choice.

A grieving family needs some time and space to recover emotionally from their loss, but social trends are making things more and more difficult with each passing day. It is high time the society realised the difference between a funeral and a wedding.

Muhammad Majid Shafi
Islamabad

► **ARMS LICENCE:** Shortly after turning 25, I decided to apply for an arms licence, as the Sindh Arms Rules prescribe 25 years as the minimum eligible age. I approached the relevant office and was asked to submit the required documents. After completing the documentation, I was told that my licence would need to be 'entered into the system'. When I asked what that meant, I was bluntly informed that this would only be possible upon payment of Rs60,000. I was shocked and left the office without proceeding further.
Haseebullah
Karachi

► **MODERN POLICING:** Many aspiring Central Superior Services (CSS) candidates, including myself, have historically viewed the Police Service of Pakistan (PSP) through the lens of authority. However, the bridge between the public and law-enforcement can only be built through emotional intelligence and community policing. Modern policing is no longer just about patrolling; it is about understanding the psychological triggers of crime and using digital literacy to tackle threats. By integrating behavioural sciences into police training, we can produce officers who are trusted, not feared. It is time we started viewing the PSP as a platform for social reforms and justice rather than just a badge of power.
Noor Babar
Lahore

► **EXAMINATION TIME:** Severe cold waves are expected in the days ahead in regions like Quetta and Gilgit where temperatures often fall below freezing point in the season. Candidates appearing in the upcoming Central Superior Services (CSS) 2026 examination face serious difficulties in reaching examination centres during early morning hours under such harsh weather conditions. It is, therefore, suggested that the Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC) should adjust the timings to late mornings, preferably from 11am to 2pm. This would bring much relief to the candidates travelling from peripheral areas. Such a considerate step would ensure a fair chance of participation for all concerned.
Qaiser Khan Marri
Kohlu

External Ombudsman

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